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AUTHOR Patton, Patricia L.
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ABSTRACT

This report describes activities of Project Work, a federally funded program to provide vocational preparation skills and transition services for high school students with disabilities. The program served 150 students at a large urban high school in San Diego (California). Three major objectives were accomplished: (1) development of an employability skills course involving both classroom instruction and community-based job training; (2) training and support for parents relating to vocational development, transition services, referral to adult agencies, and self-advocacy; and (3) provision of support to project participants to ensure proper referral to appropriate adult agencies. The employability skills course was given daily to groups of 12-15 students and covered a multitude of job search, job maintenance, and work-related interpersonal skills. Job developers were able to place 120 students at over 55 paid worksites where students were supported by weekly visits from job coaches and biweekly evaluations. Transition services included links with the Department of Rehabilitation, development of an Individualized Transition Plan, and helping students obtain necessary documentation (e.g., social security card and birth certificate). Workshops for parents and students and home visits comprised the parent support component. Project dissemination has included the instructional curriculum, other publications, and inservice training activities. The curriculum is now being taught in over 15 San Diego classrooms. (DB)

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EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS FOR STUDENTS WITH MILD DISABILITIES: PROCESS AND OUTCOMES

Presented By:

Patricia L. Patton, Ed.D., Associate Professor & Coordinator

The University of Central Florida at Daytona Beach

International Conference on Career Development

The Division of Career Development

The Council for Exceptional Children

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Project Work is a federally funded program designed to provide vocational preparation skills and transition services for high school students with disabilities. The project began in October of 1990 and continued throughout August 1993. This time period has included six school semesters and three summer sessions. The program took place at Morse High School, a large urban high school located in the southeast section of San Diego. The overall goal of the project has been to provide a smooth and uninterrupted transition from school into the adult community for minority youth with mild to moderate disabilities. These efforts should result in paid employment, successful independent living, and adequate adult support services for all youth who participated in the project.

Three major objectives were accomplished in order to meet the project goals. The first objective was the development of an Employability Skills course which consisted of two major components: (1) Classroom instruction in skills critical for successfully obtaining a job and for maintaining employment. The course curriculum prepares students to conduct a successful job search, to be a good employee, and to get along with others in the workplace, and to advocate for oneself in school, work, and in the community; and (2) Community-based job training, placement, and support with SDSU graduate students acting as job coaches in collaboration with school-based and state agency vocational rehabilitation counselors. Enrolled students earned high school credits for the classroom and on-the-job activities. Various members of the project staff served as job developers and coaches resulting in 80% of the students experiencing paid employment.

Parent training is a second major component of the project. This area consists of in-service training and support for parents and guardians of each student relating to vocational development, transition services, early referral to adult agencies, and self-advocacy. Family members participated in parent-training sessions conducted by

project parent support specialists who also serve as parent facilitators within the local school district. As a result of their efforts, family members became active in the vocational and educational goals of their children.

The third major component was the provision of support to assure all project participants were properly referred to appropriate adult agencies offering services and on-going support to students after leaving high school. The providers of these services include the California State Department of Rehabilitation, the State Regional Center, San Diego Community College District, San Diego City Schools' Project Gold, and the Job Corps. Transition specialists from these programs became an integral part of all project activities.

Project Work has successfully met the goals which were initially set forth. This report describes the target population and outlines the project's accomplishments in serving the many high school students who participated in the program.

Demographics

Since its inception in Fall of 1990, 150 students have participated in Project Work at Morse High School. Although many students have been referred to the program, the following data and summaries represent those students who have remained in school long enough to receive at least a minimal amount of benefits and/or services. Other students who had started in Project Work were not active for long due to personal reasons such as family relocation, schedule conflicts, or new school placements.

Initially, the primary criteria for eligibility was that each participant have an active I.E.P. on file with the school. From this group, potential participants were chosen through a variety of methods including teacher and counselor referrals and parent requests.

The project parent support specialists made visits to the home of each potential participant This visit was important for providing parents with information about the

program and for securing the support and participation of parents. Parent support specialists were also able to secure all signatures on necessary consent forms for testing, field trip, and publicity. from the parents or guardians of each student.

AGE and GRADE LEVEL: All participants were high school students in grades ten through twelve, and ranged in age from 16-19.

HANDICAPPING CONDITIONS: All participants were enrolled in the special education program at Morse High School. Assessment data listed on students' most recent I.E.P. indicated that every student had at least a moderate to severe learning disability. In addition, approximately 25% of the students had a secondary disability including communicative disorders, hearing impairment, severe emotional disturbance, mild mental retardation, cerebral palsy, or health impairments.

ETHNICITY: Morse High School is located in an area of San Diego which has a very high percentage of African-American, Hispanic, and Asian residents. Because the majority of students at Morse attend their home school, the participants in Project Work accurately reflected the community population. Of the total student population, 23% were female, 77% were male, 83% were African-American, and 15% were Hispanic, and 2% Laotian.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS: Many of students and their parents were receiving some type of financial assistance in order to meet their families' needs. The socio-economic struggles of the community affected the lives of the students in many ways, including their education and vocational opportunities. The dropout rate at Morse is approximately 40%, and truancy is also a significant problem at the school. Job

opportunities are limited in southeast San Diego and, therefore, competition for employment is intense.

Approximately 5% of the participants were known to be drug users, while others are presumed to have similar problems. At least twenty of the students were known to be actively involved in neighborhood street gangs, while others were suspected of some form of involvement.

Employability Skills Instruction

The Employability Skills course was developed after an extensive review of professional literature which identifies those skills most critical to a young person's success in the world of work. Lessons plans and materials were specifically developed to be consistent with research-based effective instructional practices and appropriate for use with secondary level students with learning difficulties. Course content includes a multitude of job search, job maintenance, and work-related interpersonal skills including the following lessons: (1) Obtaining documentation necessary to become employed; (2) Preparing a resume; (3) Completing a job application; (4) Identifying jobs of interest to you; (5) Finding job leads; (6) Organizing a job search; (7) Using the telephone directory in your job search; (7) Contacting employers by telephone, in person, and in writing; (8) Interviewing for a Job; (9) Handling work-related paperwork, e.g. timecards, paycheck stubs, work schedule, tax returns; (10) Being a good employee; (11) Getting along with others on the job; (12) Being punctual and having good attendance; (13) Getting to work, e.g. telephoning for bus route information, reading bus maps and schedules; appropriate and safe behavior on public transit; (14) Managing your personal finances; (15) Making positive job changes, e.g. ending a job, handling stress on the job; (16) Setting goals for your future; (17) Planning for your Individual Transition Plan meeting and being an effective self advocate.

Two periods of the class were held during Fall and Spring semesters of each academic school year. The class met daily for 50 minutes. Each section of the class consisted of 12-15 students for a total of 48-60 students per academic year. This number is almost twice the number originally projected to be served (20 students per year.) The course instructor was a credentialed teacher hired by Project Work specifically to teach this class. A teaching assistant was also hired to assist in classroom instruction, job development, and job coaching.

Job Placement and Support

To coordinate job placement, Project WORK used the services of a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor from San Diego City Schools. In addition, the Employability Skills teacher and graduate interns from San Diego State University's Department of Special Education assisted in job development and support. These job developers found worksites in the community that were receptive to working with both students and staff. Students experienced the traditional job application process including filling out applications, interviewing, working out transportation requirements, and arranging schedules and received support from project staff as needed.

Job developers were able to place 120 of the 150 (80%) students at paid worksites. Of those students who were not placed, some simply had no desire to work and turned down many opportunities offered to them. Others dropped out of the program before placement was made because of relocation outside of Morse High School or, in a few cases, because of involvement with the juvenile court system.

The 120 students who experienced work held a total of 160 different jobs. These 160 jobs included placements at over 55 worksites including hospitals,

universities, restaurants, private offices, large and small businesses, schools, supermarkets, and movie theaters. Roughly 50% of these positions were initially subsidized through different federal and state programs such as Project Workability and summer Hire-a-Youth. When the student proved to be a good employee during the time period of subsidized pay, many employers elected to hire the student on a competitive basis. Approximately 50% were jobs paid directly by the employer.

Although individual hours of employment fluctuated, most students worked between 12 and 20 hours per week during the school year, and between 25 and 30 during summer and holiday periods. Most students earned minimum wage while some were paid as much as $5.25/hour.

Most employers were impressed with the manner in which the students presented themselves, and often complimented students on their interviewing skills, their ability to complete applications neatly and properly, and their overall appearance. The fact that all of the participants had current resumes and adequate documentation to become employed impressed many employers, and gave project participants a competitive edge over other entry-level applicants.

Many employers considered the on-going support offered to them to be a stong incentive to hire a Project Work student. In addition, the financial incentives and subsidies available added to the program's success in finding quality job placements. A few employers were interested in building a positive image within their community, and found hiring students with disabilities a means of improving their image in the community.

Job coaches visited each student at their work on at least once weekly. When necessary, this contact was more frequent. At least every two weeks, employers were asked to complete a brief performance evaluation of the student/employee by commenting on work attitude, appearance, attendance, and

general work habits. This evaluation enabled project staff to be well-informed of each student's progress, to maintain an open line of communication with employers, and to resolve minor problems in student's work performance before they became serious.

Over the course of the project, job developers strengthened the delivery of job development and job support services. When the need for transportation training for the students was realized, a strong mobility training element was incorporated into the program. This training enabled students to get to worksites, many of which located outside the immediate neighborhood. In addition, the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor with assistance from the job coaches, was able to develop strong working relationships with those employers who were most appropriate supervisors for beginning workers. This effort has significantly contributed to participants' success in their first experiences in competitive employment.

Transition Services

Recognizing the difficulty high school age students traditionally experience in becoming a client of and receiving services from the California State Department of Rehabilitation (D.R.), the State of California initiated the Transition Partnership Projects. These collaborations between the Department of Education and the Department of Rehabilitation began five years ago and have led to a smoother and more effective transition process for students throughout the state. Within San Diego Unified School District, this transition project is called Project GOLD. Working in conjunction with Project Gold, Project Work students were able to enjoy many of the benefits of D.R. both as a student and later as an out-of-school client of D.R.

Although none of the students were clients of D.R. before enrolling in Project Work, over 85% of them eventually became D.R. clients and received a variety of services from this agency such as: allowance for work-clothes and uniforms of at least $25.00 and often up to $150.00 when deemed appropriate; automatic eligibility for handicapped bus passes which cost $11.00 per month as compared to $22.00; reimbursements of the $11.00 bus pass charge until employment was obtained; support with job leads and worksite supervision; and most important, a continuance of services beyond high school provided through the Project GOLD program.

By the project's completion, 98% of the students have obtained a social security card, 85% possess a California State I.D.s, and 90% possess a copy of their birth certificate.

An Individualized Transition Plan (I.T.P.) was developed for each student before leaving the program. This plan was created during meetings with each participant and his or her family in order to insure that appropriate, realistic, comfortable goals were identified and a viable plan of action created. Copies of this plan were placed in each student's school file and also forwarded to adult agencies with which student will be involved after high school graduation.

In addition to the Department of Rehabilitation and Project Gold, referrals were made to other adult support agencies including the state Regional Center. Students who expressed a desire to continue their studies were referred to a San Diego Community College and/or Continuing Education Center. Other students chose to enroll in vocational training programs such as the Job Corps. or San Diego Skills Center. In almost all situations, support from D.R. and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor was instrumental in making this transition successful.

Parent Involvement and Training

The involvement of parents or guardians of students has been vital to the project goals. The Project used the services of two parent facilitators (project parent support specialists) from the local school district to plan and coordinate this component of the program. The parent support specialists are district employers who serve as a liaison between school and parents of children and youth in special education programs.

Before a student began participating in Project Work, the parent support specialists visited the student's home to share information about the program and enlist the support of the parents or guardians. The goals of the project were discussed as well as ways in which the parent could become involved. Necessary paperwork was signed. The lines of communication between the project staff and the students home were left open for future sharing of concerns and progress.

During each year of the project, parents or guardians were invited to attend an informational and awareness workshop sponsored by Project Work. Students were also invited to attend. Topics for these workshop included: What is a learning disability and how does it feel to have one?; How to get involved with and take advantage of community resources; How to become involved in planning your child's transition from school to work; and an overview of the Employability Skills course.

Project staff made every effort to encourage parental attendance at these workshops. A small financial incentive was offered to each parent to compensate for baby-sitting or transportation fees incurred. Lunch and door prizes were provided to all those who attended. During the first four semesters, one full-day workshop was held on a Saturday. In an attempt to increase attendance , this format was changed to a half-day Saturday workshop. As a result of these changes, parent attendance was greatly increased.

At the conclusion of each workshop, participants were asked to complete an evaluation of the workshop. These evaluations were consistently extremely favorably. An overwhelming number of parents felt the information presented and topics discussed were highly relevant to their child and useful for their own knowledge. Parents commented that the information provided during the workshops had otherwise not been made available to them.

Dissemination

A key objective of the program has been to disseminate the results of the program via published monographs, journal articles, conference presentations, consultation activities, and other appropriate means. Throughout the three-year period, project staff have actively worked toward effective dissemination; consequently, the project is well-known and highly regarded in the San Diego area as well as outside the local region.

Project staff have widely disseminated the project developed Employability Skills instructional curriculum. Approximately one hundred copies of this program of 90 lesson plans has been made available to fifty different organizations, schools, or individuals throughout the state of California. As of September 1992, the curriculum has been available through Educational Resources and Information Clearinghouse (ERIC) on Children with Handicapping Conditions. A description of the curriculum and information on obtaining copies has been submitted for publication in *The Special Edge*, a widely-read publication of the California State Department of Education and also in the state newsletter *Resources in Special Education* (*RiSE*).

Other project developed materials have also been made available to parents and special education professionals. These include two handbooks developed by project staff to meet the needs of participants and their families:

(1) *How to Work and Live in the Real World: A Guide to Community Resources in the San Diego Area.* Contents include names, addresses, and a description of services offered by various local agencies; (2) *How to Work and Live in the Real World: Basic Steps for Youth with Handicaps and Their Parents and Teachers* Contents include easy to read instructions on obtaining necessary documents such as a social security card, birth certificate, bus pass, work permit, and state-issued I.D. card. Information is also given on ways to receive help from various adult agencies. Both booklets are written on an easy to read level and are available in English or Spanish. Both booklets are available from ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped Children.

In addition, a guide was written specifically for parents/guardians of participating students. This guide was given to the parent/guardian of each project student and disseminated to interested individuals via conference presentations. Many professionals expressed a great need for materials relating to parent involvement and support.

Project staff developed an Employee Performance Evaluation form which was made available to conference participants. This evaluation form was designed for supervisors complete in order for supervisor and job coach to quickly identify and monitor student/employee strengths and weaknesses in a variety of work-related areas.

Project staff have conducted ten local in-service training activities for teachers, resource specialists, and special education administrators. Nine conference papers were submitted, all of which have been accepted for presentation. All of these were invited presentations. Presentations included, but are not limited to, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) National Conference; CEC Division on Career Development National Conference;

Learning Disabilities Association State Conference; Association for Persons in Supported Employment, National Conference.

Three journal articles have been submitted for publication. One of these appeared in the Spring 1992 issue of *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*.

Project staff have made approximately ten presentations to graduate students in the Department of Special Education at San Diego State University. In addition, the project staff has engaged in on-going dissemination activities in the form of consultancies and membership on local task forces and advisory committees. Of special note are two project staff who are members o the local Transition Task Force, a body which will ultimately make policy decision impacting the target population.

Institutionalization

Project staff are pleased that the curriculum is now being taught in over fifteen classrooms in the San Diego Unified School District. In August 1993, project staff conducted a full-day presentation on the Employability Skills program to San Diego Unified School District special education personnel. The audience consisted of twenty teachers and school personnel who plan to implement the project curriculum in their classrooms beginning Fall 1993. In addition to the San Diego Unified School District, approximately twenty school districts throughout California have purchased the curriculum after attending conference presentations. Project staff feel confident that the program has institutionalized to a great extent within the local school district and that an even greater number of schools will elect to use the Employability Skills program in the 1994-95 schoolyear.